

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 SS-15 SNM-02 SP-02 INR-07 PM-04 NSC-05 DODE-00

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1985
INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
CINCPAC
AMCONSUL MANDALAY

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 RANGOON 2551

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, BM
SUBJ: THE CAPTAINS' COUP PLOT--PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

REF: RANGOON 2336 NOTAL

1. SUMMARY: DURING THE FIRST HALF OF JULY, GUB AUTHORITIES UNCOVERED AND CRASHED A COUP PLOT INVOLVING PERSONAL ASSISTANTS TO HIGH RANKING OFFICERS. THIS HAS SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGIME SINCE IT DEMONSTRATES DISSATISFACTION AT THE HEART OF ITS PRINCIPAL POWER BASE, THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT, AND RAISES SUSPICIONS ABOUT THE ARMY'S TRUSTWORTHINESS. THE EFFECTIVE LIFETIME OF THE PRESENT REGIME AND SYSTEM HAS PROBABLY BEEN SHORTENED, BY HOW MUCH IT IS HARD TO SAY, BUT WE DO NOT SEE ANY EARLY LIKELIHOOD OF FUNDAMENTAL POLICY CHANGES, GOOD OR BAD, NOR DO WE BELIEVE U.S. INTERESTS ARE IMMEDIATELY THREATENED. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2. A SAMLL GROUP OF RELATIVELY JUNIOR MILITARY OFFICERS WERE STILL IN THE PRELIMINARY STAGES OF PLOTTING A COUP TO OVERTHROW

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THE REGIME WHEN THE GUB DISCOVERED THE PLOT JULY 2. ALL THE

CONSPIRATORS WERE QUICKLY ARRESTED, AND A THOROUGH INVESTIGATION, LED BY NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE BUREAU CHIEF COLONEL TIN OO, WAS CONDUCTED. PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE PLOT, THE ARRESTS, AND A PLANNED TRIAL WAS MADE JULY 20.

3. DESPITE THEIR JUNIOR RANKS (MOSTLY CAPTAINS), THE PLOTTERS WERE IN IMPORTANT AND SENSITIVE POSITIONS. THEY INCLUDED A MEMBER OF THE STAFF OF GENERAL SAN YU, BSPP GENERAL SECRETARY AND HEIR APPARENT TO PRESIDENT NE WIN, AND THE PERSONAL ASSISTANTS (AIDES) TO GENERAL KYAW HTIN, DEFENSE MINISTER AND ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF; TO COLONEL THAN TIN, DEPUTY MINISTER OF MINES; TO COLONEL MYO AUNG, DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL DEFENCE COLLEGE; THE COLONEL HLA PE, COMMANDER OF THE NORTHERN COMMAND; AND TO COLONEL HLA TUN, COMMANDER OF THE NORTHWEST COMMAND.

4. IN ALL, 14 OFFICERS WERE DIRECTLY IMPLICATED IN THE PLOT: THREE CAPTAINS WHO WERE TERMED "CONSPIRACY LEADERS," FIVE CAPTAINS AND A MAJOR WHO WERE CALLED "ACCOMPLICES," AND THREE CAPTAINS AND TWO MAJORS WHO WERE SAID TO HAVE BEEN "DRAWN INTO THE CONSPIRACY." MANY OTHER OFFICERS WERE CALLED IN FOR QUESTIONING, AND THREE COLONELS, INCLUDING GENERAL STAFF COLONEL MAUNG MAUNG, HAVE BEEN DETAINED AND ARE UNDER INTERROGATION, NOT FOR DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLOT BUT FOR "DERELICTION OF DUTY" IN CONNECTION WITH IT.

5. IN ITS OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT, THE GUB CLAIMED THE CONSPIRATORS WERE TRYING TO "WRECK THE SOCIALIST ECONOMIC SYSTEM" AND WERE PROMPTED BY "PERSONAL AMBITION" AND "WORSHIP OF PERSONALITY CULT" (FOR UNNAMED PERSONS, PROBABLY REFERRING TO GENERAL TIN OO). OUR MOST AUTHENTIC SOURCES, HOWEVER, INDICATE THAT THEY WERE MOTIVATED PRIMARILY BY BURMA'S ECONOMIC PLIGHT AND BY CONVICTION THAT THE MORE PRAGMATIC POLICIES NECESSARY TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION CAN ONLY BE INSTITUTED THROUGH A CHANGE IN REGIME. ALTHOUGH PERSONAL AMBITION MAY HAVE BEEN A FACTOR FOR SOME OF THEM, AS THE ELITE OF THE JUNIOR OFFICER CORPS THEY ALREADY HAD BRIGHT PROSPECTS UNDER THE PRESENT REGIME, AND WE BELIEVE THEIR MOTIVES WERE PROBABLY MORE PATRIOTIC THAN PERSONAL. WHILE THE CAPTAINS PRESUMABLY SHARED NE WIN'S DISTASTE FOR CORRUPTION IN THE GUB, THIS WAS NOT THEIR PRINCIPAL MOTIVATION.

6. THERE WAS NO FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLOT AND NO REASON TO
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BELIEVE THE CONSPIRATORS WERE INSPIRED BY ANY FOREIGN IDEOLOGY. HOWEVER, OUR MOST AUTHENTIC SOURCES SUGGEST THAT THEIR POLITICAL IDEAS WERE VAGUELY PRO-WEST AND PRO-DEMOCRATIC.

SIGNIFICANCE

7. EVEN THOUGH THE PLOT WAS QUICKLY DISCOVERED AND CRUSHED, WE BELIEVE IT HAS CONSIDERABLE SIGNIFICANCE, PERHAPS MORE THAN

ANY OTHER INTERNAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN RECENT YEARS. OUR
PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF ITS SIGNIFICANCE:

A. FOR THE REGIME:

THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE PLOT DEMONSTRATES THAT THERE IS
WITHIN THE ARMY SERIOUS DISSENSION AND DISSATISFACTION WITH
CURRENT POLICIES AND LEADERSHIP. SINCE THE ARMY CONSTITUTES
THE ESSENTIAL POWER BASE OF THE REGIME, THIS IS THE PLACE IN
WHICH DISSENT IS MOST DANGEROUS. STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS, WORKER
UNREST, AND THE LIKE MAY BE TROUBLESOME, BUT THE ARMY IS THE
ONLY ELEMENT OF BURMESE SOCIETY WHICH CAN EITHER ITSELF OVERTHROW
THE GOVERNMENT, OR PREVENT THE GOVERNMENT'S BEING OVERTHROWN BY
OTHERS. COUP PLOTTING WITHIN THE ARMY BRINGS INTO QUESTION THE
ARMY'S RELIABILITY AS A FORCE FOR CONTROLLING DISTURBANCES. THUS,
WHILE WE SEE NO IMMINENT DANGER TO THE REGIME, AND WHILE, INDEED,
POTENTIAL PLOTTERS HAVE BEEN GIVEN A VIVID DEMONSTRATION OF THE
RISKINESS OF SUCH ACTIVITY, A NEW ELEMENT OF LONGER TERM POLITICAL
INSTABILITY HAS BEEN INTRODUCED.

B. FOR THE LEADERS:

PRESIDENT NE WIN. WHILE THE FORMAL POWER OF THE PRESIDENT
REMAINS VIRTUALLY ABSOLUTE, THE MYSTIQUE OF MONOLITHIC ARMY
LOYALTY UPON WHICH HIS MANDATE HAS RESTED IN THE PAST HAS BEEN
DAMAGED. HE MAY NOW BECOME MORE SUSPICIOUS OF HIS COLLEAGUES,
MORE SECURITY CONSCIOUS AND ISOLATED THAN EVER, AND LESS INCLINED
THAN EVER TO SHARE POWER OR DELEGATE AUTHORITY; HIS RULE MAY BE-
COME TIGHTER THAN EVER, BUT HE WILL BE ON THE DEFENSIVE. WHAT
EFFECT THIS NEW ELEMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE WILL HAVE ON
THE MOODY, HYPOCHONDRIAC PRESIDENT'S WILL AND VITALITY REMAINS
TO BE SEEN.

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1986

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GENERAL SAN YU. THE REGIME'S NUMBER TWO MAN IS MORE THAN EVER DEPENDENT ON NE WIN'S FAVOR. ON THE ONE HAND, AND IN THE NEAR TERM, SAN YU'S CLAIM ON NE WIN'S FAVOR MAY HAVE BECOME STRONGER THAN BEFORE, BECAUSE WITH THE ARMY'S RELIABILITY IN QUESTION, HIS OWN POWER BASE, THE PARTY, COULD BECOME MORE INFLUENTIAL IN THE REGIME'S INNER CIRCLE. SO FAR, ALSO, SAN YU HAS SURVIVED THE RECENT SPATE OF RUMORS THAT HE WAS IN TROUBLE BECAUSE OF HIS WIFE'S CORRUPTION. ON THE OTHER HAND, SAN YU'S UNPOPULARITY WITH ALMOST EVERYONE EXCEPT THE BSSP IDEOLOGUES COULD MAKE HIM A LONG-RUN LIABILITY TO NE WIN, WHO COULD DECIDE THAT SINCE SAN YU CAN'T KEEP THE ARMY UNDER CONTROL HE NEEDS AT HIS RIGHT HAND SOMEONE WHO CAN. IF NE WIN WANTS TO IMPROVE HIS OWN POPULARITY WITH THE ARMY, ONE WAY TO DO IT WOULD BE TO SACK SAN YU. GENERAL TIN OO. GENERAL TIN OO'S RESTORATION TO FAVOR WITH NE WIN SEEMS LESS LIKELY THAN BEFORE, BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH HE WAS NOT INVOLVED IN THE COUP PLOT, THE CONSPIRATORS INTENDED TO CALL ON HIM TO ASSUME LEADERSHIP IF THE COUP SUCCEEDED. NE WIN DOES NOT LIKE RIVALS FOR PUBLIC FAVOR, AND ONLY DESPERATION COULD DRIVE HIM TO REINSTATE TIN OO. ON THE OTHER HAND, SINCE TIN OO REMAINS VERY POPULAR IN THE ARMY, UNDER SOME HYPOTHETICAL CIRCUMSTANCES NE WIN COULD DECIDE HE NEEDS TIN OO'S HELP IN GETTING THE ARMY UNDER FIRMER CONTROL.

GENERAL KYAW HTIN. AS DEFENSE MINISTER AND ARMY CHIEF OF
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FNB, GENERAL KYAW HTIN IS THE MAN MOST DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ARMY; YET HIS PERSONAL ASSISTANT, WHO HAD BEEN WITH HIM FOR FOUR YEARS, WAS ONE OF THE THREE "CONSPIRACY LEADERS.". KYAW HTIN IS THUS LIKELY TO LOSE INFLUENCE WITHIN THE GUB LEADERSHIP, THOUGH IT IS NOT CLEAR TO WHAT EXTENT.

COLONEL TIN OO. COLONEL TIN OO'S ROLE IN INVESTIGATING, EXPOSING AND CRUSHING THE PLOT SHOWS THAT HE RETAINS NE WIN'S FULL CONFIDENCE. HE HAS PROBABLY BECOME MORE POWERFUL THAN EVER; BUT AT THE SAME TIME HE MAY WELL BE MORE THAN EVER DEPENDENT ON NE WIN'S PERSONAL FAVOR AND MORE THAN EVER MISTRUSTED AND DISLIKED BY MOST OF HIS FELLOW OFFICERS.

C. FOR GUB POLICIES:

FOR THE PAST HALF YEAR, NE WIN HAS BEEN TRYING TO GO ON THE OFFENSIVE TO BUILD SOCIALISM IN BURMA. THE GOVERNMENT IS AWARE THAT THE CONSPIRATORS' MOTIVATIONS INCLUDED STRONG DISSATISFACTION WITH BURMA'S SOCIALIST ECONOMIC SYSTEM. WILL THIS AWARENESS SLOW NE WIN'S "OFFENSIVE" OR WILL IT SPUR HIM TO REDOUBLE HIS EFFORTS? WILL HE SEEK TO PLACATE THE "MODERATES" OR WILL HE REDUCE THEIR INFLUENCE STILL FURTHER? IF NE WIN DECIDES TO FIGHT BACK WITH A HARD LINE--S HE IS TEMPORARILY INCLINED TO DO--HE CAN

HOLD TOGETHER A FACADE OF IDEOLOGICAL UNITY AND DETERMINATION FOR A WHILE LONGER, BUT IN SO DOING HE MAY ALIENATE THE LAST OF THE MODERATE PRAGMATISTS IN HIS REGIME, WITH DISASTROUS LONG-RUN CONSEQUENCES. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF HE TAKES A "SOFT" LINE, IT COULD SPELL THE END OF HIS CURRENT EFFORT TO BUILD "SOCIALISM," AND REPRESENT A MAJOR PERSONAL DEFEAT. IF NE WIN THINKS HE CAN POSSIBLY AVOID SUCH A DEFEAT, HE WILL DO SO. HENCE, HE WILL PROBABLY REACT INITIALLY BY HARDENING HIS POSTURE. HOWEVER, PARTICULARLY AS THE PROMISED PUBLIC TRIAL GETS UNDER WAY, GENERATING NEW AND UNPREDICTABLE PRESSURES, IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT NE WIN MIGHT BE FORCED TO REVERSE HIMSELF.

D. FOR THE ARMY:

THE ARRESTED CONSPIRATORS INCLUDE SOME OF THE ARMY'S BEST AND BRIGHTEST YOUNG OFFICERS; THREE COLONELS HAVE ALSO BEEN DETAINED AND DISGRACED FOR "DERELICTION OF DUTY" IN CONNECTION WITH THE PLOT. PARTICULARLY FOLLOWING GENERAL TIN OO'S DISMISSAL LAST MARCH, THIS IS A HARD BLOW FOR THE ARMY LEADERSHIP TO ABSORB. HOWEVER, WE DO NOT SEE A REDUCTION IN THE WILL OR THE CAPABILITY OF THE ARMY TO CONTINUE TO CONDUCT MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST INSURGENT GROUPS OR NARCOTICS TRAFFICKING ACTIVITIES. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE ARMY'S FORMERLY ASSUMED UNITY CAN NO LONGER BE
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TAKEN FOR GRANTED; INTRA-ARMY SUSPICIONS ARE LIKELY TO BE AROUSED; SENSITIVE POSITIONS WILL PROBABLY BE MORE CAREFULLY CONTROLLED; AND MIS IS LIKELY TO BECOME MORE POWERFUL THEN EVER
;

THE RANKING OFFICERS WHOSE PERSONAL ASSISTANTS WERE IMPLICATED IN THE PLOT HAVE PROBABLY LOST FACE AND MAY LOSE THEIR JOBS OR PROMOTION CHANCES. FURTHER ROTATION OF COMMANDERS AND OTHER KEY PERSONNEL MAY BE IN THE OFFING.

E. FOR U.S. INTERESTS:

WE SEE NO IMMEDIATE OR EVEN NEAR-TERM THREAT TO OUR INTERESTS. IN PARTICULAR, WE EXPECT OUR COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BURMESE ON NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION TO CONTINUE. WHILE THE ARMY HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED IN ITS POLITICAL ROLE, WE DO NOT BELIEVE ITS EFFICIENCY IN NARCOTICS CONTROL HAS BEEN HARMED. IN FACT, WE HAVE SPECIFIC INFORMATION THAT OPERATIONS AGAINST TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS HAVE CONTINUED NORMALLY IN THE PERIOD SINCE THE PLOT WAS DISCOVERED. OVER THE LONGER TERM, THE IMPORT OF THESE EVENTS FOR OUR INTERESTS WILL DEPEND ON: (1) WHETHER NE WIN REACTS WITH A HARDENING OR A SOFTENING OF HIS POLICIES; (2) WHETHER--OR HOW MUCH--THE LIFE SPAN OF THE POLITICAL STATUS QUO HAS BEEN SHORTENED; (3) WHETHER THE EVENTUAL TRANSITION TO A NEW SET-UP IS SMOOTH OR DISRUPTIVE; AND (4) WHETHER THE NEW SET UP (WHETHER "LEFT" OR "RIGHT") IS SUCH AS TO IMPROVE THE PRODUCTIVE EFFICIENCY AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF BURMA. THESE UNKNOWNNS ARE TOO FAR BEYOND OUR INFLUENCE TO WARRANT ANY CHANGES IN U.S. POLICY WITH REGARD TO BURMA.

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